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ABSTRACT

America's educators have the ability and the responsibility to help at-risk students learn that they can succeed and that they must make the most of life. Educators should provide a caring environment, encourage students to take risks, and provide support when risk taking is not always successful. Rural students, like urban and suburban students, face difficulties caused by poverty, drugs, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, violent crimes, and the social welfare system. The classroom teacher must teach the child and not a subject. Before teachers can teach a subject, they must teach students to like themselves, to get along with others, and to know right from wrong. It is also essential for the teacher to teach a child to take appropriate chances. Too many students limit their possibilities by being afraid to take a risk. Students must be taught to believe in themselves. Teachers must be concerned about the students who are less capable of success, regardless of the reasons for that reduced capacity. The environment and small size of the rural school provides advantages for the teacher and student to overcome the elements which lead to a diminished educational capacity. (KS)

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A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER:
RURAL EDUCATION AND THE AT-RISK STUDENT.

Students come to school, day after day, and are never truly present in mind and body, to fully receive an education. Without an education their future in America is greatly diminished. Too many of our students do not have the support system necessary to believe in themselves. They fail, because they refuse to take chances, to adventure out, to go boldly where they have never gone before. America's educators have the ability and the responsibility to help these students learn that they can succeed and that they must make the most of life.

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A Bridge Over Troubled Water: Rural Education and the At-Risk Student

Students come to school, day after day, and are never truly present in mind and body, to fully receive an education. Without an education their future in America is greatly diminished. Too many students do not have the support system necessary to believe in themselves. They fail, because they refuse to take chances, to adventure out, to go boldly where they have never gone before. America's educators have the ability and the responsibility to help these students learn that they can succeed and that they must make the most of life.

School age children, in modern America, whether rural or urban live in a world that is demanding. A world that is often unforgiving. Students who are not able to make it in school are usually doomed to a life of difficulty. Those who struggle with peer acceptance, success in school and their own self perceptions face a world and peers who are often difficult for them to deal with. Every year in America five thousand teenagers take their own life rather than face a difficult and unforgiving world.

Those children, without the years and experiences of adulthood, often feel like the words penned by Paul Simon a generation ago. "When you're weary, feeling small . . . . When times get rough and friends just can't be found." Yet the lyrics of that Paul Simon song also provide promise. "Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down."

Far too many of today's school age children face what to them are troubled waters. America's educators have the ability and the responsibility to be that bridge over troubled water, for America's

children. To show a true concern for their struggles, outside the school as well as within. To provide a caring environment, which fosters a belief in self dignity. To encourage students to take risks, to be willing to take a chance. To provide support when risk taking is not always successful.

The words of Paul Simon also indicate items of comfort and understanding. Comfort and understanding that is essential for children to be willing to take chances. "When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all." "I'm on your side." "I will comfort you." "I will take your part." "If you need a friend I'm sailing right behind." Successful educators do at times dry tears and comfort their students which sends the message that they are on the students side. At times teachers must go the extra mile to take care of students and to be their friend.

Children who may be labeled as At-Risk, marginal achievers, etc., do not live just in urban and suburban America. Rural America has it's share of students who are afraid to take risks, who have given up on themselves and the system. Rural America is not free from poverty, drugs, child abuse, children having children, violent crimes, the social welfare system and other contributing factors.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, every day in the United States, twenty-seven children will die from no other cause than poverty. That means about ten thousand of America's children die each year from poverty alone. Almost three thousand teens will

become pregnant and a little over fifteen hundred children will drop out of school. Ten children will be killed and thirty wounded by guns. Almost thirty three hundred children will run away from home and over sixteen hundred will be in adult jails. Over two hundred children will be arrested for drug abuse and one hundred and thirty five thousand children will bring a gun to school. Such problems are not limited to the urban and suburban areas. Those problems exist in rural America. Children who live in such a difficult and unforgiving world bring a variety of problems with them into the rural school.

Please allow me to introduce to you some of my kids. Kids who need your help. They need someone who cares about them. Someone who will believe in them. Someone who will encourage them to take chances and will be there to encourage success and to assist them to deal with the lack of success. Many of my kids would do just fine if someone, anyone, in their lives, could simply be there to show them how to try, fail and learn from failing. Someone to help them to not accept failure. They desperately need someone to help them to believe in themselves. To believe that they can.

I would like to share with you four young pre-teens. Four young men in search of themselves. They desperately need to understand why the world treats them as it does. They need to know that someone is there for them. Above all they need to be able to believe in themselves and to take chances in an uncertain world. These four boys were introduced in a Stephen King story entitled: "The Body."

The story takes place in rural America and presents the struggles of four friends during the summer before their entry into Junior High School. All of them were at-risk for different reasons.

Christopher Chambers the tough kid from the wrong side of the tracks. Chris Chambers was really a kid with potential, but he knew that he was from the wrong family and that everyone else believed that he was a looser, destined to be of little value to his world. Chris needed someone to believe in him. Someone to champion his cause.

Theodore Duchamp a flamboyant young man who attempted to hid his home life, from others. Teddy was the victim of an alcoholic father, who had been in and out of mental institutions. Teddy was both mentally and physically abused by his father. Teddy vigorously attempted to hold onto his families claim to fame. Teddy's only references to his father was as a veteran and hero of World War II.

Vern Tessio, a non descript child, who was overweight and a scaredy cat. He was afraid to take chances. Others used his lack of confidence to make fun of him. Vern like a candle hid under a bushel was unable to shine and show his true worth. Vern is typical of many of my kids, who so desperately need to develop a positive self image. There is so much potential in the Verns of our world, that is untapped because no one takes the time to rescue them from mediocrity.

Gordon Lachance was the only somewhat normal kid in the group. He was from a family, well accepted by the community and had good basic educational skills. Gordie would be taking college prep classes in Junior High School. But, he was at great risk of becoming a lost child. His older brother the family hero, had died earlier that year, and Gordie had simply been ignored by a good and descent family. Gordie was in danger of being won over to the attitudes of his friends. His contact with his family was not as strong as his connections with his at-risk friends. Gordie was in danger of coming to believe that no cared about him and that he did not need to try because it would make no difference.

Later in life Vern and Teddy were lost to mediocrity because that was what the system expected of them. School, family and community did not provide any encouragement nor opportunities for them to learn to be successful.

Gordon Lachance and Christopher Chambers shared their High School experiences together. Because of the friendship of Gordie, Chris Chambers took one of the greatest chances of his life and enrolled in the college prep classes, even though he may have doubted his chance of success. Gordie won over Chris and both were saved from the peer pressure of those who do not believe in themselves. That time good peer pressure won.

Chris and Gordie went on to college and were successful.

Christopher Chambers became a champion for the causes and needs of others. Chris was an At-Risk kid who returned much to his world. Gordie, a journalism student became a journalists and author who provided the story of his twelfth summer with three friends in Maine.

The world needs more people like Gordon Lachance to save the Christopher Chambers of this world. There are not a sufficient number of individuals like Gordon Lachance in this world and certainly not enough Christopher Chambers who are rescued from the world of disappointment and failure. It is also sad but true, that there are too many like, Vern and Theodore Duchamp who are lost from the world of productive adults, all because no one took an interest in them. No one cared for them. No one attempted to save this world one little piece at a time.

American education must reach out to those students who are unable to achieve. Regardless of whether the conditions are a result of our society, the students own family or lack of a family, or the students inability to be successful within the school house. As a society and educators we must be concerned about the quality of educational opportunity for students who are often less capable of success, regardless of the reasons for that reduced capacity.

Many of the students who enter the classroom, each day, need someone who will care about them. A teacher who will refuse to allow failure and will encourage success for all students. Students

can tell when their teacher is faking. Those teachers with the ability to provide genuine caring will be able to obtain the trust of the student. A trust that must be present for the student to adventure out and take risks. Ideally it would be great if all classrooms were like Mr. Rogers neighborhood, where everyone is liked just the way they are.

Far too many children come to school, day after day, afraid to take chances because no one seems to be able to care for them. If teachers do not provide that caring environment, then students will continue to reflect the lines from "The Rose:"

"It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance.
"It's the dream afraid of wakening that never takes the chance.
It's the one who won't be taken, who can not seem to give.
And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live."

Beyond a caring environment, the classroom teacher must be willing to teach the child and not a subject. I have three children, if one of them entered kindergarten in your school there are three things that I would want you to do before you place paper and pencil in front of them and attempt to teach your subject.

First, teach them to like themselves.
Second how to get along with others.
Third right from wrong.

Once you have done that and have shown my child that you care for them, then you can began to teach your content. To use paper and

pencil exercises. To began the process of using failure as a diagnostic tool. To began the process of labeling and disabling.

For I believe that if my child likes himself, knows how to get along with others, knows right from wrong and he believes that you like him. He will be able to overcome the negative aspects of content, failure as a diagnostic tool, labeling and other disabling elements of the institution of education.

Some within our profession fail to realize that the content they teach is often less important than how they teach. Students need teachers who are able to provide a comfortable environment which encourages risks and provides support when the adventure does not turn out as well as planned. Teachers who refuse to allow failure and encourage student success. Teachers who can see the student and the educational process from a positive viewpoint. Teachers who are more concerned about the child than the content of the textbook or their class.

It is also essential that the teacher teach a child to take appropriate chances. For nothing great or even average was ever accomplished without risks or taking chances. Students need to know that taking a chance and coming up short is alright. I would suggest that you teach'em what George Herman Ruth knew. That if you are going to hit a home run [or even get on base] you are going to have to swing at the ball.

I am sure that there are some students in your class that do not know that they can hit a home run. Some of you, like myself, when I was a student in the public schools, were not sure of the future and whether you could succeed.

Too many of our students limit their possibilities, by being afraid to swing at the ball. They will never hit a home run if they refuse to try a s
wing.

The greatest failure in life is not to have tried at all. The second greatest failure of all is to fail and not to learn from it and to quit trying. Many of you have failed before and you will fail again. But, if you can teach'em what George Herman Ruth Knew, they will dust themselves off and step up to the plate and swing at the ball.

As you prepare your students to go through life, please teach'em what George Herman Ruth knew. If they remember nothing else. teach'em to remember that they are most likely to be successful, if they know what George Herman Ruth knew. Don't be afraid to swing at the ball, for to be afraid to do so will limit their possibilities as well as those who care for them. And you will improve their opportunities to be successful and to make a difference.

Teach'em to believe in themselves! For if you do not, who will? Teach'em that when they stand at the plate of life and it is

their turn at bats, that they will either enter that situation believing that they can or they will believe that they can not. Teach'em that when they step up to bat, to remember what George Herman Ruth knew!

In addition to teaching them what George Herman Ruth knew, teach them about the ten most important two letter words in the world. "If it is to be, it is up to me." If it is to be, you need to teach'em that they are going to have to put into action what George Herman Ruth knew. That if they are going to hit a home run [or even get on base] they are going to have to swing the ball.

Rural America has its share of students who are at-risk with failure within the school and life in general, for a variety of reasons. Those students will have to compete within a very competitive market place. They will pay taxes, vote and support our future. If for no other reason than your retirement you MUST be concerned about the students who who are less capable of success, regardless of the reasons for that reduced capacity. America's educators have the ability and the responsibility to help these students learn that they can succeed and that they must make the most of life.

To accomplish the task of preparing students for a future, the key element is the ability of the teacher to provide a comfortable and supporative environment. An environment where the current child and the future adult can accept themselves and learn to

adventure out and try that which they have never dreamed. The school and teacher that can attempt to treat the child as they themselves would want to be treated has the greatest capacity to be effective with all children.

The environment and size of the rural school provides great advantages for the teacher and student to overcome the elements which lead to a diminished educational capacity. The smallness of many rural schools presents opportunities for the student to get to know their teachers. All students need someone, anyone within the school to appreciate who they are and to care for them as an individual. The rural school often provides great avenues for success in that area.

Teachers in America's rural areas can truly be a bridge over troubled water for those students who are at-risk with failure. Students who are less capable of success should be less likely to get lost in the crowd.

Even though some rural schools are unable to provide what might consider the best content education, those schools can and are providing a neighborhood environment which allows students to take chances and to learn from both their success and failure. Rural educators can be proud that, "When darkness comes And pain is all around," for their students, their actions often say to those students, "Like a bridge over troubled water I will ease your mind."